

A Monument to Bai Lang, the “White Wolf”

Philip BILLINGSLEY* & XU Youwei**

Preface

In November 2003 one of the authors had the unexpected opportunity to visit a rather unusual monument: the gravestone of Bai Lang, the so-called “White Wolf”, leader of “Old China’s Last Great Peasant Rebellion”. For almost three years, from October 1911 to the summer of 1914, Bai Lang had led an army of some twenty thousand followers the length and breadth of north China in opposition initially to landlord abuses, later to the reactionary rule of President Yuan Shikai¹⁾ himself. Dis-

* 本学文学部

** 上海大学文学院歴史系

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counted for years both in the media and in official writings as no more than a bandit pest, it was only after 1949 that Bai Lang and his movement began to receive serious attention from historians.²⁾ When the monument was formally erected by the local People's Government in 1996 beside the spot where the rebel leader's headless body had been secretly interred by his family (his head had been cut off and displayed on the walls of Kaifeng "as a lesson to the others" following his death in battle 82 years before), it marked the final rehabilitation of a man once disparaged as "the low-class Chinaman's hero".³⁾ The present article, after translating and annotating the inscription on the stone, will explain the background to the visit and clarify some outstanding points about the history and significance of the site.

1. The Inscription

Inscription to Commemorate Bai Lang's Life and Achievements

Bai Lang's style names were Mingxin and Yongcheng. He was born in 1873 in Daliu Village, Zhangbaqiao Township (xiang), in what is now Baofeng County. His grandfather's name was Zhen; his father, Songshan, married Xingzhen, who gave birth to one son and four daughters. When small, Lang attended a private school, but he left after a little more than a year and when a little older began to work on the family's land. In 1908 he was accused on false charges by the landlord Wang Zhen and thrown into prison for more than a year. Only when his family had sold off more than 100 mu of land⁴⁾ did they have enough money to buy him out. Before and after 1911, there were successive years of famine due to crop failure. The people had no way of making a living, but local officials continued to oppress them. Soon the bodies of the starving filled the fields and people rose up on all sides. In October 1911 the magistrate Zhang Litang falsely accused Lang and others of conspiring with bandits. Left without a choice, Bai Lang resolved to raise followers in revolt. On the 14th of October he led 30 others to take over the hamlet of Yaodianpu, seizing one rifle, one pistol and thirty homemade guns from a rich landlord family there, and made

contact with the Lushan chiefs Li Lang and Zhang Qun; together they had more than 100 followers, a viable military force. In 1912 Bai Lang led his followers to open the granaries of the rich to help the poor, and after that many starving people joined his Righteous Army; by June 1913 it had more than 6,000 members. In July 1913, responding to the anti-Yuan Shikai Second Revolution,⁵⁾ Bai Lang led his army south. By the time they entered Hubei province in September the Second Revolution had already been defeated, and the Righteous Army returned to Henan. After that, still seeking to ally with Sun Zhongshan's revolutionary cause, they turned south again, and for the month of January 1914 were active along the borders of Hubei, Henan, and Anhui provinces. At this time they first began to use the name Army of the Central Plain to Restore the Han (Zhongyuan Fu-Han Jun), and Bai Lang took the title “Great Commander” (Da Dudu).⁶⁾ Their slogans were “Rob the Rich and Help the Poor” (Dafu Jipin), “Restore the Han and Expel Yuan [Shikai]” (Fu-Han Tao-Yuan”), and “Oppose the Dictatorship and Uphold the Republic” (Fandui Zhuanzhi, Yonghu Gonghe). Yuan Shikai, greatly alarmed by the rapid growth of the Righteous Army, ordered Commander-in-Chief of the Army Duan Qirui,⁷⁾ with the support and direction of imperialist powers Britain and Russia,⁸⁾ to take command of the Three-Province [Hubei-Henan-Anhui] Suppression Campaign against the Righteous Army. That March the Righteous Army broke through the heavy encirclement, captured the town of Jingziguan, and crossed into Shaanxi province. By this time the Righteous Army had grown to more than 20,000 strong, and called itself the “Citizens' Army to Expel the Robber” (Gongmin Taozei Jun).⁹⁾ Subsequently the Righteous Army crossed into Gansu province, planning to enter Sichuan province and set up an Anti-Yuan Shikai base area there. However, Gansu was a barren land with little human habitation so that the Righteous Army found it difficult to sustain itself. In addition, it came under armed attack from landlord-led units of national minority peoples, and because it did not do enough to solve the problem of ethnic differences it met with severe defeats.¹⁰⁾ Finally, it made an erroneous decision to return to west Henan. On the way back the Righteous Army came under repeated attack from Beiyang warlord troops¹¹⁾

and suffered heavy casualties. When it arrived back in Nanyang,¹²⁾ the Nanyang and Hubei contingents deserted the army. At the beginning of August, Bai Lang and his remaining 60-odd followers of the Righteous Army were surrounded on the jumbled hills of Hulangpa by several thousand Beiyang soldiers under Niu Guilin and other officers, and after a battle lasting several days Bai Lang was hit and killed by a stray bullet. He was 41 years old. Bai Lang's Righteous Army had numbered several tens of thousands, had been active over four years, and had fought its way across five provinces. It affected more than eighty counties, and dealt heavy blows to the reactionary regime of Yuan Shikai and to the authority of the feudal-landlord-local bully class. It allied itself energetically with the democratic revolutionary forces led by Sun Zhongshan and with the workers' movements in different places,¹³⁾ and wrote a glorious chapter in the history of popular struggle in modern China. The People's Government of West Ward, in order to mark these achievements, has carved this inscription that [Bai Lang's] valour be eternally remembered.

*The People's Government of West Ward, Pingdingshan City
26 September 1996*

2. The Visit

On the morning of November 21 2003, a Santana 2000, product of a German-Chinese joint venture, sped across the dusty North China Plain from Zhengzhou toward the sprawling city of Pingdingshan in central Henan province. It was hard not to reflect on how the man whose grave we were going to see would have fared had this fast modern highway existed at the time he raised his flag of rebellion some 90 years before. With a road like this for the government to move its troops and tanks along at will, would Bai Lang have lasted three weeks or even three days? Modern communications, alas, are not conducive to the birth of heroes.

When planning his visit to Henan the author, though he had been writing and researching for more than 10 years on the subject of bandits in republican China (including, of course, Bai Lang), had known very

little about the gravestone beyond the fact that it existed. The trip had been intended firstly to gather materials for an article surveying scholarship on Bai Lang, and secondly to pay a visit to Baofeng (adjacent to Pingdingshan City), the initial focus of Bai Lang’s activities, and to that end he had contacted local researchers and archivists in the provincial capital of Zhengzhou in order to enlist their help.¹⁴⁾

Pingdingshan lies some 150 kilometres southwest of Zhengzhou, a matter of a few hours’ drive in today’s China. As one enters the county town of Baofeng, no longer walled but still redolent of the past, the Yingbin Boulevard that bisects the town is a surprise, putting one in mind of the economically advanced cities of China’s coastal littoral, despite the continuing poverty of much of the surrounding countryside of Henan. Waiting for the author that day in the offices of the Communist Party History Research Institute were Mr. Zhang Xianming of the local branch of the Chinese People’s Political and Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Mr. Jia Yong’an from the office of the Baofeng County Gazetteer, and Ms. Yu Haizhu, Deputy Director of the Baofeng Party History Research Institute. Zhang Xianming, already 78 years old, has lived all his life in Baofeng, and is the area’s foremost expert on Bai Lang. In his long life he has been an assistant headmaster, assistant editor in chief of the county gazetteer, and also assistant director of the county CPPCC committee. He is, in short, one of the area’s most celebrated literary-cultural figures, and on this day, I learned, he together with Mr. Jia and Ms. Yu, were to take me to the little-visited monument to Bai Lang in the village of Guanzhuangcun in neighbouring Pingdingshan’s Shilong (“Stone Dragon”) Ward.¹⁵⁾

Some thirty minutes after the car sped off along the flat and dusty highway (cars in China, for some reason, always travel at top speed regardless of road conditions), my eyes picked up alongside the road a sign informing us that we had just entered Daying – Daying, the “walled robber capital” which had figured in so many episodes in Bai Lang’s life as a rebel: at last we had entered Bai Lang territory! Not long after that the car came to a halt beside a small, nondescript-looking grave mound in a

remote northeastern corner of the village of Guanzhuangcun, and we all climbed out to take a closer look.

It was not what I had expected. The grave itself, tucked away in a corner of a field, was a simple mound surrounded by a plain concrete wall, with weeds growing luxuriantly over it. But there beside it was the magnificent stone erected by the local People's Government seven years before to commemorate the memory of the man whose remains are now sadly adorned by weeds. In shape it is a traditional Chinese gravestone, facing south as geomancy requires, the corners of its red-tiled roof uplifted as if striving to attain Heaven in a single bound. On the front, the side facing away from the highway, are the four words, inscribed from right to left in bold characters, *Yijun lingxiu* ("Commander of the Righteous Army"), and beneath them, carved into a slab of black stone, comes the inscription – *Bai Lang zhi mu* (The Grave of Bai Lang), followed by the short account of Bai Lang's rebel career translated above.

In stark contrast to the stirring words of the inscription, the field surrounding the grave is littered with dry grass and twigs, while the base of the stone itself has become the lodging point for a pile of firewood. Running past to the right of the plot (see the photograph) is a series of high-voltage electricity lines, beyond which the framework of a three-storeyed house under construction can be seen. Beyond that still lies a small factory, whose fumes wafted sluggishly over us as we stood lost in thought beside this incongruous gravestone. As we stood there, Mr. Zhang filled in a little of the background to the spot where we were standing.

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After Bai Lang's death at the hands of a rampaging landlord militia in late July or early August 1914, the few rebels who had stayed with him to the end, sworn mutually to silence, buried his body on the slopes of the mountain where the final encounter had taken place before disappearing back into the relative safety of the hills. Not surprisingly, with a reward of 100,000 *yuan* on Bai Lang's head and the mountains teeming with government spies, the secret was not kept for long. Within a few days an

army column arrived to claim credit for the victory, dug up the body and, after cutting off the head, threw the rest of Bai Lang’s remains back into the pit. The blood-stained head was put in a sack and taken to the provincial capital of Kaifeng where it was placed in a cage and hung on the great city wall as a lesson to all those who might dream of following in the footsteps of the great rebel chief.¹⁶⁾

Decapitation, the ultimate expression of official malice, was the punishment habitually meted out to rebels, bandits, and other disturbers of the public order in traditional China. In the old cosmological order of things, one’s body was a gift from one’s parents, and to allow it to be injured in any way was the height of filial impiety. When an individual died, it was imperative that he or she make the journey to the Other World physically intact, and to be without one’s head was to be condemned to an eternity of wandering in search of completeness, the chances of being reborn effectively nil. So profound was the horror at such a prospect, even in the hearts of those who issued the condemnation, that a fair-minded emperor might even give “permission” to an otherwise upright official caught out in some unfortunate affair normally warranting the ultimate penalty to commit suicide by poison or suicide, rather than take responsibility for condemning them to an eternity of despair. No such niceties were forthcoming for the likes of Bai Lang.

Meanwhile, back in Baofeng, ferocious atrocities by the army and local militia against the benighted villagers who had dared to support the dead rebel’s policy of “robbing the rich to help the poor” (*dafu jipin*) were raging throughout the villages of the county. Bai Lang’s grieving family feared for his torso too now that its resting place was known. One night, under the cover of darkness, they dug it up and reburied it a few miles away in the village of Guanzhuangcun, on a small plot of land belonging to his wife’s brother. Their hope, happily borne out, was that because the village was outside the radius of military reprisals, and because the owner of the land was not a blood relative of Bai Lang, the headless body would be allowed to rest in peace even if its soul was denied the luxury of reincarnation. Closing away in their minds the secret of what lay

beneath a mound of fresh earth in that northeastern corner of Guanzhuangcun, they got on with the daily round of survival.

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More than eighty years after these events China was on the brink of reincarnation itself, and behaved in the time-honoured fashion. Throughout Chinese history, new regimes or dynasties, once they had achieved stability and prosperity, had felt the need to rewrite from the point of view of their own orthodoxy not only the history of the preceding era but also the local record of events, a tradition referred to as *shengshi xiuzhi* (“in prosperous times, rewrite the record”). As a measure of China’s new-found confidence as it dragged itself out of the shadow of the Cultural Revolution into the heady days of the late 1980s, a high tide of local gazetteer compilation at every level from province downward got under way that saw many of the old regime’s assumptions about society and politics thrown out of the window. The city of Pingdingshan was no exception, and it was in the early 1990s, during the research for the “Local Personages” section (traditionally a mainstay of local gazetteers) that Bai Lang came to be reassessed from “local bandit”, the status to which he had been condemned since his ignominious death, to “local hero”, and included among the ranks of “illustrious persons”. The site of his grave was tracked down and restored, and 10,000 *yuan* was secured by the People’s Government of Pingdingshan City’s West Ward to erect the stone that stands there now to commemorate the memory of Bai Lang, finally held up as a model citizen. Soon after that the grave was given official protection as a province-level cultural relic.

In September 1996 the stone was officially unveiled, the inscription ending, as we have seen, with the hope that Bai Lang’s “valour may be remembered eternally”. In 2004, the local government resolved to raise the funds to construct a Bai Lang Memorial Hall on the site, and to that end has already purchased some thirty-odd *mu* of land from the previous owners (which no doubt accounts for its current dilapidated state since the land is no longer being farmed).

For all its having achieved such exalted status, the current level of

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awareness of Bai Lang and of his grave among local people is low, even among sections of the city bureaucracy not directly concerned with the memorial stone, from whom our requests for information met with the telephone equivalent of blank looks. He does not yet seem to have made it into the local school curriculum, nor, according to our inquiries at the Pingdingshan City Education Bureau, do local schools organize trips to the grave site during the Qingming Festival each April. (The fifth day of that month is the time when Chinese people traditionally visit the graves of their family’s ancestors to pay their respects by sweeping the graves clean and leaving offerings of food and other things. Schools will usually also organize educational visits to the graves of local notables or revolutionary martyrs.)¹⁷⁾ It remains to be seen whether the opening of the Memorial Hall, scheduled for some time after 2005, will change things for the better. Ninety years on from his death, for all the belated official efforts to rehabilitate him, this hero of old China appears to have been left behind amid China’s march toward the future.



The grave of Bai Lang, surrounded by simple slabs of white concrete, with the newly-erected gravestone to its left.

NOTES

- 1) Yuan Shikai was President of the Republic of China from 1912 until his death in 1916 following his abortive attempt to have himself enthroned as emperor of a new dynasty.
- 2) For details, see Philip Billingsley and Xu Youwei (2004).
- 3) Billingsley 1988: 12.
- 4) One *mu* was equivalent to roughly 0.06 hectares.
- 5) Claiming that Yuan Shikai had stolen the fruits of the 1911 Revolution that abolished the previous Qing dynasty and ended 2000 years of imperial rule, republicans under Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yatsen) mounted a new armed uprising that they called a “Second Revolution”, but were defeated after less than two months’ fighting.
- 6) Although the “Han” in this title is the same as that in “*Han zu*” (Han race), rather than having a racially exclusive meaning, the “Han” in this case referred to all the Chinese people, whose common enemy was the dictator Yuan Shikai.
- 7) A military subordinate of Yuan Shikai before the 1911 revolution that transformed China into a republic, Duan Qirui later became a warlord politician, and served as premier on several occasions in the 1920s.
- 8) Both Britain and Russia sent military “reconnaissance” teams and “spotter” aeroplanes armed with bombs to bolster the fight against Bai Lang. It is not clear whether they actually took part in any fighting.
- 9) The “robber” was of course Yuan Shikai, who had “stolen” the Republic from the Chinese people.
- 10) A majority of the people in Gansu belonged to the Mohammedan Hui minority, and many more were Tibetan. Local demagogues stirred both of these up to resist Bai Lang’s advance, and they suffered heavy casualties in the fighting.
- 11) “Beiyang” was originally the name of the Western-style army organized by Yuan Shikai in the closing years of the Qing dynasty. After 1911 the term was applied to all the north China military units allied to Yuan, and by extension to the government itself.
- 12) Nanyang is a city a little to the southwest of the rebellion’s birthplace, close to the point where the rebels had crossed back into Henan from Shaanxi.

- 13) At this point in time there is no record of Bai Lang having allied with “workers’ movements” – in fact, there were few workers at all since China was still very much pre-industrial. It is possibly a reference to the support expressed by Chinese firms in Hubei following Bai Lang’s attacks on overseas companies like the British-American Tobacco Company and Singer Sewing Machines.
- 14) The author is grateful to Mr. Lu Haijiang and Mr. Li Chenyou of the Henan Provincial Communist Party History Research Institute in Zhengzhou for making the necessary arrangements for me.
- 15) West Ward (*Xi qu*) was renamed as Shilong Ward (*Shilong qu*) a few years after the unveiling of the Bai Lang memorial stone.
- 16) There is a celebrated photograph of Bai Lang’s (unrecognizable) head in its cage, taken by a foreigner who happened to be in Kaifeng at the time. See Billingsley (1988).
- 17) Bai Lang’s sole remaining direct relative is his grandson, who lives with his family in Baofeng. Apart from their visits to the grave each April at Qingming festival time, it is apparently unvisited and unswept. (Zhang Xianming 2004)

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From 1911 until 1914, soon after the founding of the Republic of China, Bai Lang, known in the press as the “White Wolf”, led China’s last great peasant rebellion across five provinces of north China. At its height the rebellion had some 20,000 followers, and caused the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of government troops. After his death in battle in July 1914, Bai Lang’s head was cut off and hung on the walls of the provincial capital Kaifeng, but his body was secretly buried by his family in the neighbouring county, on land belonging to his wife’s brother. Bai Lang became known as a “bandit”, and his historical role was forgotten. 82 years later, in 1996, the local authorities in Henan province finally recognized the important historical legacy of Bai Lang’s rebellion, and decided to put up a memorial stone beside the unmarked grave where his body still lay.

This article describes a visit to the grave site in 2003, translates the inscription on the memorial stone from Chinese into English, and fills in the background to Bai Lang’s controversial death.